

Proud to be an Episcopalian  
Christ Church, Andover, MA  
Lent V, March 25, 2007  
The Reverend Harold R. Bronk

I am proud to be an Episcopalian. Now, we all know that pride goeth before a fall, but I'm not proud of *myself*, I am proud of my Church. What a strange thing to say on the Fifth Sunday of Lent; we're supposed to be humbling ourselves and not talking about pride. Well, I can't help it, because our Bishops: Tom Shaw, Bud Cederholm, and Gail Harris, were at the meeting of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, and they contributed an enormous amount to a Resolution which the House of Bishops adopted and of which I am very proud.

We Episcopalians forget, easily, that we are the first democratic, 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic' church in two thousand years, actually, seventeen hundred and eighty-nine years. The first democratic church. If you look at the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the people who put together the Articles of Confederation (which you remember from your high school social studies class was what governed the country before they discovered that we really needed a Constitution), most of them were Anglicans—Episcopalians. After the American Revolution when the new Republic was being founded, the Church of England people, the Anglicans in the new United States, realized that they could no longer go on being Church of England, because in order to be Church of England, you had to swear allegiance to the monarch, and we didn't have one. There were some people who wanted George Washington to be a king, and he refused.

And so the same people who wrote the Articles of Confederation and then the Constitution are the people who wrote the Constitution and Canons at the beginning of the Episcopal Church. We were a daughter church, but no longer the Church of England. What does that mean? It means being a democratic church--and this is the part we seem to forget--being a democratic church means that this parish, Christ Church, Andover, at an annual meeting that is held every year, votes members of the congregation to the vestry. Those elected officials represent the congregation in their dealings in the parish, with other parishes, with the diocese, and with the national church. When we don't have a priest, a rector, the vestry, your elected representative, appoint a search committee. The search committee searches, and it makes a recommendation to the vestry, and the vestry then moves toward the election of a new rector. Before the vestry can elect the new rector, they have to tell the bishop whom they have chosen. The bishop has sixty days to respond. The bishop does not have the right to say no, but the bishop has a right to be heard, and until he or she has been heard, the vestry cannot proceed to the election.

When we know that a bishop in our diocese is going to retire, every single parish elects a representative or several representatives to the diocesan convention and the rector of every parish, and every other priest in the diocese all have a vote, all rectors and other priests and the lay people who are elected. At the diocesan convention, this group of elected officials choose a new bishop. They elect a bishop. And our whole Church is governed by the General Convention which meets

every three years, and our diocese in conjunction, the lay people and the clergy, elect representatives from the diocese of Massachusetts to go to the general convention every three years. And the general convention is organized, not at all strange to say, like the Congress of the United States. There's an upper house, called the House of Bishops, and a lower house, which is made up of the elected representatives, clergy and laypeople from the dioceses of the whole Church, about 111 dioceses the last time I counted, though some seem to want to leave. It's a democratic church, and it's been that way ever since 1789. It's absolutely critical that we understand this; because I'm sure you've read in newspapers and seen on television that our part of the Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church, is in danger of being kicked out of the Anglican Communion, because some of the other Churches in the Communion don't like what we did. Most of those churches are not democratic. Their bishops are appointed, not by the people, not elected, but appointed, and their bishops' rule.

Let's look at our church. That's the first thing, the first reason why I'm proud to be an Episcopalian--we are a democratic church. That has consequences. There is change. I was in a black parish on the west side of Detroit a few years ago, and in a little chapel where on Sundays we celebrated the early Eucharist, there was a picture of a black priest. Absalom Jones. Absalom Jones was a black slave. He married a woman who was a black slave and earned enough money as a slave to buy her out of slavery. Absalom Jones attended a church in Philadelphia, and he organized an African congregation, and they were allowed to sit up in the balcony of the church. Then that particular church, not an Episcopal church, said that they really didn't want them to be there, and Absalom Jones, who was a very prominent organizer of that church, went to the Episcopal bishop of Pennsylvania, and the Episcopal bishop of Pennsylvania ordained this former black slave in the Episcopal Church. That makes me proud to be an Episcopalian.

I suspect that Absalom Jones was the first person of color to be ordained as a priest in the Anglican Communion, and I suspect even more so, that he was the first former slave. The Civil War was still sixty years away when he was ordained. The Episcopal Church survived the Civil War without splitting north and south. Almost all the other mainstream churches split. For example, the Southern Baptist church is the largest Baptist church in the United States, probably in the world, but they don't talk to the Northern Baptists any more. They haven't talked with them since the Civil War. The Northern Baptists are very progressive; the Southern Baptists are archconservative. Other churches split over the slavery question. The Episcopal Church didn't. I'm proud of that. I'm proud that being together as a church, even when there were disagreements, was more important than the disagreements.

Some of you can remember that not all that many years ago, only fifty, if you were married in the Episcopal Church and your marriage came to an end and you got divorced, the church had to decide who was the "innocent party" and who was the "guilty party." And the "innocent" party could be allowed to go to Communion and, under special circumstances, remarry; the guilty party could not. We don't consider a marriage that falls apart to be such a terrible evil that the people have to be scapegoated. We allow remarriage of divorced people; they still have to be people who meet certain criteria. They have to take

care of their children if they have children. They have to make sure that the parties are taken care of; we're concerned about that. Other churches, notably the Roman Catholic Church, have not come to the point where they are willing to readmit people to Communion who have been divorced and remarried. As a matter of fact, there's a document on the Pope's desk, a petition to allow remarried divorced people to receive Communion. So far, they haven't done anything about it.

When my wife, Joyce, a young adolescent, she went to Mass in the Roman Catholic Church every day for a while, and there was a woman who was also there every day, but who didn't go to Communion. Joyce asked someone why the woman didn't go to Communion, and she was told, "Well, she's divorced; she can't go to Communion."

We, the Episcopal Church, encourage the kind of intellectual scholarship that rejects fundamentalism and Biblical literalism. I'm proud of that. You don't see an Episcopalian saying, "Well, that's wrong; it's in the Bible; I can quote you the verse." What about the verses around it? One of my favorites is when people say that the Old Testament says that homosexuals should be stoned to death. I always say to them, "Well, whose responsibility is it to carry that out?" It also says in the same place that if a person blasphemes, the person should be stoned to death. You say, well, as a matter of fact, somebody wrote a funny letter, a theoretical letter to her pastor saying, "Our neighbor blasphemes all the time. He's cutting the grass in the back yard and his mower breaks down and he blasphemes. Now, whose responsibility is it to stone him to death? Is it our responsibility? Or is it the responsibility of the police? Should we call the police to stone him? Or should we call the church? It's in the Bible!"

Episcopalians don't think like that, at least most of us don't. And I'm proud of that, because we believe in Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. These are the three legs of the three-legged stool that our church sits on.

Our church was one of the first churches in the United States to bear witness against the tragic war in Vietnam. Episcopal churches were established as sanctuaries. Some say, "Well that's unpatriotic." Well, it's standing for some principles that were higher than the laws of the country. And we prevailed. It was the first time in the history of the United States that a popular movement brought a tragic war to an end. I'm not talking about Democrats and Republicans, because both parties were in charge when that war was going on.

Our church supported the Civil Rights movement. When Martin Luther King emerged as the leader of a non-violent resistance to the way in which black people were being treated in the south and also in other parts of the country, our church sent people--lots of young people, priests, lay people--to support that movement. As a matter of fact, in our calendar of saints, if you want to call it that, there is the name of a young seminarian from the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Jonathan Daniels who, when a little black girl was threatened by a Ku Klux Klan member with a shotgun, moved in front of the gun and was killed, instead of the little girl. We think sainthood and holiness have to do with standing up for other people's rights.

We were the first church in the Anglican Communion, and as a matter of fact the first church in the whole 2,000 year history of the 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic' church, to allow the ordination of women. We should be proud of that.

We were the first church in the 2,000 year history of the church to ordain women as bishops. A little black woman from Philadelphia who was vice-president of The Sun Oil Company, Barbara Harris, was ordained as a bishop in the American Episcopal Church. I'm proud of that, aren't you?

And we are the first church in the Anglican Communion to recognize that gay and lesbian people are not freaks. They're not weird; they're not perverse; they're not deformed; they're not sick. They're people just like the rest of us, and that God is more interested in justice than in what two consenting adults do under the covers. Isn't that remarkable?

When I look at what I call the "crotch issues,"—it sounds a little vulgar--the marriage of the clergy, the ordination of women, the admission to Communion of divorced people, the place of gay and lesbian people in the church, the place of contraception and abortion--these are the six issues that I call the "crotch issues," and I insist that the incarnation did not take place in order to regulate people's sex lives. That's not really what it's about.

Our church has led the way for our fellow Anglicans and for other Christians around the world, and I'm proud of that. And when I mention our bishops, our bishops were given an ultimatum by the heads of some of the other Anglican churches. They said "By September 30, you have to respond to this, or else we're going to take drastic action." Our bishops met last week. Our three bishops were there and participated in drafting a resolution adopted by the house of bishops and in the resolution one of the things that they said was, "We can't decide for the Episcopal church! The Episcopal Church is democratic! The elected representatives of the church have to decide what to do, and they're not going to meet again until 2009." Our bishops stood up and said, "No! We don't have the authority to speak for the whole church! Only the church has that authority!"

And so, I'm proud, and I hope you are, too. And to paraphrase some of our politicians, I would like to say, may God continue to bless the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, and God bless us, every one. Amen.